religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Freeing Animals: Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Environmentalism and Ecological Challenges

**Dan Smyer Yü** [1,2]

[1] School of Ethnology and Sociology and The National Centre for Borderlands Ethnic Studies in Southwest China, Yunnan University, Kunming 650500, China
[2] The Global South Studies Centre, University of Cologne, 50923 Köln, Germany

**Abstract:** Buddhist environmentalism in its varieties across the world is an integral part of the global environmental discourse centered on exploring new planetary ethics for sustainable futures. While recognizing the Buddhist role in global environmental movements, the author of this article proposes that the observable strength of Buddhist environmentalism is in local and global environmental advocacy grounded in the Buddhist ethics of interdependence, even as, canonically, Buddhism does not offer what is commonly recognized by scientists and scholars as traditional ecological knowledge or religious ecology. To substantiate this, this article offers a textual assessment of the Buddhist canon's lack of systematic ecological knowledge, and a case study of how freeing domestic animals and advocating vegetarianism among contemporary Tibetan Buddhists in China, inclusive of non-Tibetan converts, mainly benefits human wellbeing and at the same time is entangled in social affairs that have little to do with the ecological wellbeing of the Tibetan Plateau and urban China. This debate is by no means intended to negate the successes of Buddhist environmentalism; instead, it draws fine lines between the claimed canonic basis of Buddhist ecology, the strength of Buddhist environmental advocacy, the everyday practices of Buddhism, and the aspirations for strengthening the ecological foundation of Buddhist environmental activism. Thinking in line with eco-Buddhists, the author concludes the article by proposing an Earth Sutra, a hypothetical future canonic text as the ecological basis of Buddhist environmentalism.

**Keywords:** freeing animals; vegetarianism; eco-Buddhism; environmentalism; Earth Sutra

**Citation:** Smyer Yü, Dan. 2023. Freeing Animals: Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Environmentalism and Ecological Challenges. *Religions* 14: 110. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010110

Academic Editor: Francisca Cho

Received: 28 November 2022
Revised: 3 January 2023
Accepted: 10 January 2023
Published: 12 January 2023

**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## 1. Introduction

Buddhist environmentalism in the twenty-first century is a form of global environmentalism, which is notably present in the intergovernmental arena of environmental governance. Recognizing Buddhist participation in environmental conservation endeavors, the Faith for Earth Initiative at the UNEP states that "Buddhists find themselves in harmony with nature by acknowledging the interdependence of all forms of life" (UNEP 2020). The UN's statement is indicative of the global momentum of Buddhist environmentalism that originated in North America, which has also spread to Asia, notably in Taiwan (Sheng-yen 2001) and mainland China, especially the eastern Tibetan regions (Sodargye 2012). While Buddhist environmental activism is widely celebrated, scholars in the fields of Buddhist studies and religion and ecology have ongoing debates on the ecological grounds of Buddha Shakyamuni's teaching on *paticca samuppada* or dependent co-origination, innovatively termed "radical interdependence" (Macy 1979, 1992, p. 11, 1995, p. 14). Ian Harris (1991) raised the question of "How environmentalist is Buddhism?" Lambert Schmithausen (1997, p. 8) contended that the principle of dependent co-origination "does not necessarily entail an ecological ethic." Damien Keown (2007, p. 97) doubted whether Buddhism could "offer a convincing answer to modern ecological problems." Christopher Ives (2017, p. 45) alleged that eco-Buddhists selectively applied Buddhist canonic texts "to claim that from the start Buddhism has valued nature".

This article continues Harris's query into "How environmentalist is Buddhism?" but rephrases it as "How ecological is Buddhism?", utilizing my canonic reading and accumulative fieldwork with Sino-Tibetan Buddhists in China, a unique modern Buddhist population inclusive of Tibetan lamas and their Chinese converts found in the Sino-Tibetan cultural borderlands as well as in urban China (Smyer Yü 2012). I hope to deliver a two-fold argument. As Buddhist environmentalit movements in Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America share a common origin in North American eco-Buddhism, drawing inspiration from the canonic sources of Buddhism, I begin with the canonic basis of Buddhist environmentalism in the case of North American eco-Buddhism as the earliest and currently most influential form of Buddhist environmentalism. The first part of my argument is that Buddhist canonic texts show the presence of nature in the images of plants, animals, and physical environments as both the background to and metaphors in the Buddha's teachings. These backgrounds and metaphors are not commonly recognized as traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes 2012) or religious ecology (Grim and Tucker 2014; Bauman 2014). This leads to the second part of my argument, namely that the canonically privileged position of humans among all sentient beings inadvertently fosters human-centeredness in contemporary Buddhist environmentalism, which largely serves non-environmentally related human interests or produces ecological outcomes not compatible with local ecosystems. The freeing of animals and promotion of vegetarianism by Buddhists in China, especially in the Sino-Tibetan cultural borderlands, supports my argument. In conclusion, I propose a hypothetical Earth Sutra, a future canonic text to be collectively written by eco-Buddhists to strengthen the ecological basis of their environmental activism and possibly to be a practical manual of Buddhist Earth stewardship.

The gravity of the two-fold argument leans toward my intent to diversify the current scholarly and public debates on the strengths and limitations of Buddhist environmentalism worldwide. Serving this purpose, my case study of Sino-Tibetan environmentalism is both regional and global. Regionally, my fieldwork sites include Golog, Hainan, the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, and the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture respectively in the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan. Globally, I have undertaken collaborative research with leading Tibetan public figures in Europe and North America. On the environmental front, I have primarily worked with Khenpo Sodargye (Sodargye and Smyer Yü 2017), one of the most active Tibetan environmentalists inside China, by interviewing him and facilitating and documenting his dialogues with scholars and his public speaking events on European and North American university campuses, as well as on the home campus of his monastic academy in Sertar, Sichuan, from 2012 to 2016. Given the limited textual space of the article, some of the outcomes of my fieldwork are referenced from my existing published studies (Smyer Yü 2014, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022).

## 2. How Ecological Is Buddhism?

The question as originally phrased, "How environmentalist is Buddhism?"—by Harris in 1991—remains relevant today given the ongoing debate on Buddhism's valuing of nature. With this question renewed in this article, I think it is necessary to point out that Harris does not elaborate on the conceptual meanings of environment and nature; he discerns "the environment" in early Buddhism as simply the "uncultivated environment" and the "antithesis of the settled agricultural land," and "nature" as the "part of the world which is neither human nor artificial" (Harris 1991, pp. 104, 108). In addition, an ecological awareness is missing, except in the instance when he draws an equation between Buddhist environmentalism and "shallow ecology"—as opposed to Arne Naess's deep ecology—suggesting that Buddhist environmentalism consists of political action against human-induced environmental degradation. Much of Harris's revisiting of the Buddhist canon is de facto more of an ecological than a political inquiry, particularly in the discussion of animals that appear in sutras.

Three decades ago, the global environmental discourse was largely situated in what Harris called the "anti-Christian leanings" prompted by Lynn White Jr.'s accusation that Christianity was the root-cause of the modern environmental crisis. Buddhist environmentalism then carried this anti-Christian sentiment (Harris 1991, pp. 102–3). The current global environmental discourse, however, especially in the growing fields of religious ecology and environmental humanities, finds itself less engaged in blame games and instead emphasizes the sacredness of the Earth (Berry 2009; Gottlieb 2004), as well as humankind's role as an ecological species (Rose et al. 2012), a geological agent (Chakrabarty 2021, pp. 14–15), and a climate-changer (Smyer Yü 2023) in the Anthropocene. Renewing Harris's question in the context of current environmental debates and re-evaluating canonical Buddhist teachings and practical relations with nature, it is more productive to ask, "How ecological is Buddhism?". Substituting "environmental" with "ecological" expands the conceptual and empirical options to address Buddhist environmentalists' interpretation of expressions of nature in the Buddhist canon, as well as to recognize the historical fact that "nature" in the canon is a nature specific to ancient India, not to the ecologically and ethnoculturally specific environments into which Buddhism has grown new roots. In addition, the systemic approaches of ecology, a branch of biology, afford more options than environmental studies would in terms of how the living environments of the Earth are relationally woven together.

While fully recognizing the regional and global impacts of Buddhist environmental activism, I argue that eco-Buddhism or ecologically grounded Buddhism is not what Buddha Shakyamuni initially intended; it is a recent creation. To substantiate my argument, I offer three counts of how Buddhism values nature: (1) the ecologically understood nature in the Buddhist canon is the environmental backdrop of the Buddha's life, and includes animals, plants, physical environments, and environmental flows, often employed as metaphors or similes for the Buddha's pedagogical expediency; (2) the principle of dependent co-origination (*paticca samuppada*) is not ecologically intended but illustrates the causal links of human suffering, and points to the "emptiness" or non-selfness of all sentient and non-sentient existences; (3) the earthly realms of sentient beings are antecedently moralized as places of *samsara*—partaking in the endless cycle of birth and rebirth replete with suffering—in which the ecological relations of life forms are largely absent.

To demonstrate the presence of nature and its ecological principle of interdependence, the texts frequently referenced by eco-Buddhists are *The Lotus Sutra*, *The Jataka Tales*, *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, and *The Maharatnakuta Sutra*. In his introduction to *Dharma Gaia*, Allan Hunt-Badiner (1990, p. xv), a longtime student of the late Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh, a leading Buddhist environmentalist, references "The Parable of the Herbs" from *The Lotus Sutra* as an example of how Buddhism speaks "reverently of nature" in the form of plants, clouds, and rain. A close reading of the sutra shows that the variety of grasses, trees, and forests are actually *likened* to sentient beings, with their different levels of intelligence determining how they receive the Buddha Dharma. In turn, Dharma, representing the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, is *likened* to the all-extensive clouds and rains that leave no sentient beings out (*The Lotus Sutra* 2002, p. 38). Here, varieties of vegetation are similes for sentient beings residing in different realms, while the omnipresent environmental flows of clouds and rain are similes and metaphors for the Buddha's teachings.

In *Dharma Rain*, another landmark Buddhist environmentalist collection of essays and sutras, Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft similarly showcase *The Lotus Sutra* as a sample of Buddhism's reverence for nature; here, Buddhists with different degrees of compassion are metaphorized as "small trees" and "large trees" (Kaza and Kraft 2000, p. 47). Alan Hunt-Badiner's *Dharma Gaia* similarly references *The Lotus Sutra* to illustrate the presence of nature in the Buddhist canon without pointing out the environmental flows such as rains and clouds serving as metaphors. Similar examples are abundant in publications by Buddhist environmentalists.

To elaborate my point, nature, as considered in *The Lotus Sutra* and other canonic texts, serves as an analogical device rather being recognized as a variety of actual ecolog-

ical worlds that are *horizontally* interconnected. When invoked as analogies of sentient beings and their lifeworlds, the grasses, trees, and forests are *vertically* united under the clouds and the rains, both of which are also analogies reserved for the Buddha's teachings. Thus, ecologically grounded interspecies horizontal relations are reoriented toward the vertical precipitation of Dharma (rain) from the Buddha. Likewise, in *The Jataka Tales*, non-humans such as elephants, monkeys, and jackals make frequent analogical appearances. Their ecological worlds are made to give way to the human moral world; therefore, the tales are parables rather than actual stories about ecological worlds. As each animal is relocated into the human moral labyrinth, the moral emerges when the tale of the animal ends (Francis and Thomas 1916). My argument so far does not rule out the fact that the animals, plants, and particular historical landscapes of ancient India also naturally occur without being employed as metaphors and similes. After combing through the Pali Tipitaka, Ven. Sharvasti Dhammika finds the following:

> There are 6400 species of fish in Jambudīpa (ancient South Asia), 4500 species of birds, and 2400 species of beasts. There are 10,000 species of trees, 8000 species of grass, 740 types of medicinal herbs, and 43 types of aromatic plants. (Dhammika 2015, p. 1)

However, his assessment is that the environmental, social, and cultural information from the Buddha's lifetime is "incidental" (Dhammika 2015, p. 2), with the exception of environmental components that the Buddha purposefully employs as the analogies and expedient means of his teachings.

Being immediately pertinent to my argument of how nature is pedagogically valued in the canon, the monsoon and rivers, for example, form a recurring climatic pattern and type of environmental flow mentioned in the Pali Tipitika as the actual historical background, metaphorized as the interactive roles of sentient worlds and the Buddha's teachings. The appearance of clouds, rain, and the fluctuating rivers such as the Ganges and Yamuna reflect the monsoonal climate pattern and the subsequent seasonally shifting weather found from the Himalayas to the riverine plains of India and the Bay of Bengal. The water, transported by monsoons and precipitating from the sky, is the primary force of changes to the annual cycles of the rivers, plant growth, animal reproduction, and human farming and foraging in ancient India. Leaving nothing untouched, it culturally enters the Buddha's teachings as similes and metaphors, including the long-lasting, monsoon-conditioned riverine metaphors of "This Shore" and the "Other Shore", with the former suggesting the suffering-laden, unenlightened life and the latter signifying the transcendental character of Buddhahood or the enlightened state of being. With the exception of variations due to the current anthropogenically induced climate change, the monsoonal climate pattern and the fluctuating rivers in South Asia remain relatively unchanged to this day (Saikia 2020); however, their presence in the Buddhist canon is either incidental or deliberately analogic.

The dichotomy of This Shore and the Other Shore leads to the question of whether or not the doctrine of dependent co-origination is ecologically intended in the Buddhist canon. My reading of the aforementioned canonic texts resonates with the assessments made by Schmithausen, Keown, and Ives that suggest that Buddhist doctrine does not entail Buddhism's attentiveness to ecologically understood nature; instead, its concerted focus is on the composite nature of self on This Shore—as a site of *samsara's* cycle of birth, death, and rebirth filled with ignorance-generated sufferings—which is to be renounced. Therefore, how does dependent co-origination support the eco-Buddhist construction of Earth-centered radical interdependence that arose in North America?

The studies by Joanna Macy (1992, 1990), Stephanie Kaza (2000), Allan Hunt-Badiner (1990), and Donald Swearer (2001), with their creative interpretation of dependent co-origination that affords the construction of a radical interdependence, reveal to the readers "the living web of natural systems", which "can broaden our sense of self and self-interest, uncovering our wider identity with the living planet itself" (Macy 1992, p. 11, 1995, p. 14). Celebrated as a radical ecological realization, this wider identity, which Macy

calls "the ecological self" (Macy 1990, p. 53), is the basis by which eco-Buddhism works toward sustainable futures. The canonic notion of dependent co-origination clearly argues for the interdependent nature of each individual life in the phenomenal world; however, its teleology lies in its well-pronounced intent to illustrate how *samsara* is embodied in each sentient being through the twelve consecutive links of ignorance, formation, consciousness, name-form, the six sense faculties, contact, sensation, craving, grasping, becoming, rebirth, and old age or death (*The Lotus Sutra* 2002, p. 56). Each link leads to the next, and together the twelve links are sequentially responsible for the generative cycle of *samsara*, the source of sentient suffering. The soteriological intent of dependent co-origination is to renounce and transcend living, dying, and transformation, which are the universal events of an ecological world.

Similarly, also serving as the foundation of eco-Buddhism, Buddha Shakyamuni's metaphor of Indra's Net, borrowed from Hinduism, cosmically, although not ecologically, illustrates the omnipresence of Dharma in the image of one phenomenal existence mirroring all its counterparts in the endless universe (*The Avatamsaka Sutra* 2022, pp. 120–125). To be noted, in systems science and in ecology, the notion of interdependence is an evidenced norm, not a radical concept (Odum 1959, p. 86; Ostrom 1990, pp. 42–71). Thus, I do not refute the notion of radical interdependence, but suggest that there are other ways to establish eco-Buddhism's radical interdependence, which I will elaborate in the last section of the article.

Given its clear engagement with the sentient world's living and dying, the doctrine of dependent co-origination is seminal for the construction of the Buddhist cosmology of that same sentient world—also known as the "six realms" of rebirth—which suggests the undesirability of ecologically shaped worlds with diverse sentient beings. The six realms are those of gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell realms (*The Lankavatara Sutra* 2022, p. 119); these realms are further parsed into two subgroups, namely the Three Good Paths and the Three Evil Paths. Gods, demi-gods, and humans are on the good side, while the rest are on the evil side. Reflecting pre-Buddhist animism that survived in altered form within Buddhism, sentient beings can be reborn into other living forms and within other worlds contingent upon each individual's past and present moral virtue or degeneration. Becoming human is apparently the most desirable incarnation in terms of moral and spiritual upward mobility; it is the physical prerequisite for the path leading a being's inner essence (its Buddha Nature) toward enlightenment. Being or becoming an animal sets one further away from the path to enlightenment.

It is, thus, reasonable to say that Buddhist cosmology is morally constructed rather than ecologically grounded. While the Buddha vowed to liberate all sentient beings from worldly suffering caused by greed, hatred, and ignorance throughout the recurring process of birth, old age, sickness, and death, the Earth's ecosphere that environs and interconnects the multitude of sentient lives is not an immediate concern of his teachings or at least is not deliberately addressed in the canon. It is fair to say that the Buddhist canon does not contain a body of consciously intended ecological knowledge that modern ecology, as a "science of the living environment" (Odum 1959, p. 4), would recognize; however, it is possible that current Buddhist environmental trends will eventually culminate in a new Buddhism—a substantiated eco-spiritual system dedicated to the wellbeing of the ecological worlds of the Earth.

## 3. Spiritual Environmentalism among Sino-Tibetan Buddhists

While the sutras incidentally mention ancient India's environmental scenes and analogically invite animals and environmental flows into the Buddha's teachings, the basic precept of abstaining from killing living beings and the subsequent monastic and lay practice of vegetarianism have ecological implications. Some of these implications, however, can be disruptive to specific local environments and ecologically conditioned human cultural heritages. Observably, since historical Buddhism traveled beyond ancient India, canonic "purity" has found itself diluted, made lenient, given new interpretations, and syncretized

with the practices and beliefs of non-Buddhists in ecologically grounded lifeworlds and in diverse culturally determined human interactions with nature. While Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings are preserved in the canon and upheld by successive generations of Dharma masters, they are nevertheless creatively incorporated into lay practitioners' personal and social spaces and environmental relations with non-human beings.

To illustrate this point, the "spiritual environmentalism" found among Sino-Tibetan Buddhists in contemporary China is a salient example. "Sino-Tibetan Buddhism" refers to the Han Chinese who practice Tibetan Buddhism under the guidance of Tibetan lamas (Smyer Yü 2012). The phenomenon appeared to be a unidirectional transmission of the canonically and lineage-based Tibetan Buddhist traditions from Tibetan teachers to their Han Chinese followers. However, after the more than three decades, during which Tibetan Buddhism spread among Han Chinese, the Tibetan lamas, the Chinese practitioners, and domestic and international scholars are becoming more and more aware of the fact that this Sino-Tibetan Buddhism reveals a pattern of Chinese Buddhist customs and habits transforming Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, the dynamic shows evidence of a "two-way street" in the course of an interethnic Buddhist encounter.

In current Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interactions, Khenpo Sodargye, one of the leading Tibetan Buddhist teachers responsible for shaping Sino-Tibetan Buddhism, used and has frequently been given credit for the phrase *xinling huanbao* or "spiritual environmentalism" (Sodargye 2011a) in public talks offered from 2010 to 2019 on university campuses in mainland China, Hong Kong, Europe, and the United States. Preceding Sodargye, although in venues serving those beyond the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist constituency, the Taiwanese Dharma Master Sheng-yen is internationally recognized for having coined this phrase at the aforementioned UN event in 2000. It is likely that Sheng-yen's coinage made its way into China from abroad and became available for Khenpo Sodargye's initiative of Buddhist environmentalism in the Sino-Tibetan context. Not too long afterward, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, Sodargye's contemporary who has been equally important in shaping Sino-Tibetan Buddhism, also began to use the phrase in reference to his constituents' participation in environmentally themed activities in the Sino-Tibetan cultural borderlands and urban China.

Nearly identical to Sheng-yen's approach, both Khenpo Sodargye and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro parse their Buddhist environmentalism into "inner environmentalism" and "outer environmentalism." Synonymous to spiritual environmentalism, inner environmentalism, as the foundation of outer environmentalism, entails the canonically based Buddhist attempt to eliminate the causes and conditions that induce greed, hatred, and ignorance—seen as the human roots of the current environmental crisis. Outer environmentalism refers to both personal and social actions to alleviate locally manifested environmental issues, and includes such actions as recycling and taking part in environmental movements. However, unlike Taiwan, mainland China has no civil society for Buddhists to forge an environmental movement in the public sphere. Faith-based environmentalist activism is rarely permitted to have public expression, except in forms organized and supervised by the government.

In this China-specific context, freeing animals and becoming vegetarian on a personal basis, although collectively promoted in Buddhist communities, are counted as the social actions of outer environmentalism. Based on his reading of scientific findings, Khenpo Sodargye refers to the coupled actions as a solution to the global environmental crisis and regional famines because "most of the world's grain is fed to livestock," and "If one practices vegetarianism just for one day, twenty people in this world can be saved from hunger" (Sodargye 2011a). In my ethnographic work with both Tibetans and urban Chinese over the last two decades, I affirmatively recognize the enthusiastic interethnic responses to the Tibetan lamas' call for saving lives in order to save the environment. At the same time, after animals are freed and when people in Tibetan areas and urban China are urged to become vegetarians, the environmental outcomes from freeing animals and promoting vegetarianism, in fact, remain to be debated regarding whether or not one can draw a direct connection between saving animals and saving the environment. The earth's complex ecosystems

and divergent individual and collective human interests complicate the claimed environmental role of this form of Buddhist spiritual environmentalism.

In spring 2013, I organized a formal dialogue between Khenpo Sodargye and Emily Yeh, a professor of geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder, specializing in Tibet's environment. During the conversation, Yeh asked Khenpo Sodargye what he meant by inner environmentalism and how it would address environmentally related social justice. His response did not offer a clear-cut definition but emphasized the environmental consequences from one's inner world polluted by greed and from the karma (actions) of previous lifetimes:

> The environment in which a human lives is the fruit of his past actions. Karmic fruits consist of correlative fruit (*nisyanda-phala*), retributive fruit (*vipāka-phala*), and other kinds. Among them, if one committed evil deeds in his previous lifetimes, the place of his rebirth in the current lifetime is a polluted environment full of rocks and thistles, extremely unpleasant. In contrast, if one accumulated spiritual merit from his good deeds in his previous lifetimes, the environment of his current rebirth is accordingly beautiful and delightful (Smyer Yü 2013, field documentation).

Yeh then asked him if it would be an injustice when a small island nation, which makes the least contribution to global warming, was going to be drowned by the rising ocean due to climate change. Khenpo Sodargye replied:

> This is a fruit of human collective karma as many people have committed collective harmful deeds. From the Buddhist perspective, previous and current lifetimes are (karmically) interconnected. In their previous lifetimes, they collectively committed many harmful deeds. In this lifetime, they may not have done harmful deeds individually; however, they likely receive retribution (from the past collective deeds). This is one reason. I also think of another reason. From the Buddhist perspective, killing humans and non-human sentient beings is an offense. Unlike people living in other places who eat lots of vegetables, the island residents kill sea animals for food. Their children grow up with eating live seafood. From childhood to adulthood, one kills countless lives. Therefore, the acts of killing invite retribution (Smyer Yü 2013, field documentation).

The inner environmentalism that Khenpo promotes hinges upon the doctrinally prescribed spiritual action to overcome one's greed and upon the practice of non-killing and the adoption of a vegetarian diet. His compassion for non-human lives is truly laudable. At the same time, his doctrinally based environmental perspective does not seem to factor in the ecological conditions that shape the specific diets of different human societies.

## 4. Limited Ecosystemic Benefits from Freeing Farm Animals

In urban China, home-based Chinese Tibetan Buddhist study groups regularly hold *fangsheng* or life-freeing events on weekends and during holidays. The frequently freed animals are farmed loaches, carp, freshwater snails, shrimp, and turtles. The animal-freeing activities are common scenes, particularly in cities with rivers, canals, or lakes. For large events supported by affluent patrons, the organizers usually pre-order these aquatic creatures in truckloads directly from aquaculture business owners or vendors. Sometimes, cruise boats are rented to ferry the aquatic animals in tanks and release them into the middle of a river or a large lake after their human patrons recite prayers for them. For smaller events, the Buddhists usually buy the animals directly from farmers' markets. The purposes of these small-scale events are not always environmentally oriented. When a family member is ill, getting married, or encountering difficulties in his or her job or business, freeing animals is a way of earning spiritual merit to offset possible endangerment or misfortune.

On the environmental front, the Han Buddhists and their Tibetan lamas are now encountering questions about whether or not they pre-study or pre-select ecologically suit-

able aquatic habitats for releasing these creatures (Sodargye 2014). For instance, wild loaches in China mainly reside in wet rice fields or muddy wetlands, but their farmed counterparts are being released by the Buddhists into rivers and lakes with deep bottoms. Thus, their survival rates are questionable. Among the freed turtles, the largely carnivorous Brazilian red-eared turtles (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) are an invasive species aggressive to native fish and reptile species. Farmed carp, because their feed is mixed in with large quantities of antibiotics, are publicly known for their likely spread of antimicrobial resistance from animal to human pathogens (Gao et al. 2009; Lockwood 2017). I once brought up these issues to Khenpo Sodargye. He responded, "We do have to be ecologically sensitive, but the important thing is that these freed animals no longer suffer from human misdeeds".

In 2011, Khenpo Sodargye stated, "Twenty years ago, it was very difficult to raise ten or twenty thousand yuan to free animals. Now, I dare not make fundraising announcements because there will be too many donations. This year, seven million yuan have already reached us" (Sodargye 2011a). My fieldwork findings from other Tibetan monasteries corroborate Khenpo's account. From 2007 to 2015, a monastery in Sershul Dzong (Shiqu County), Sichuan, with approximately two hundred monks, raised from their Chinese patrons nearly seven million yuan designated to freeing yaks. In November 2011, a lama from a small monastery not far from Khenpo's Buddhist Academy in Sertar, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, raised half a million yuan to free two hundred yaks. In early October 2014, the abbot of a large monastery in Ngawa County, Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, freed four hundred yaks with a million yuan raised from his Chinese Buddhist network.

In early fall 2019, a newly ordained young abbot in Golog, Qinghai Province, raised three million yuan from his Han Chinese patrons to free over one thousand yaks. These funds mostly went to buy out the yaks that had already been sold to industrial slaughterhouses in southern Gansu Province owned by Hui (Chinese Muslims). I conducted my participant observation with one of the trips the abbot made to Gansu and back to Qinghai. The yak freeing mission began at a large livestock holding area adjacent to a slaughterhouse in Linxia. The price of each yak varied from 8000 to 17,000 yuan, depending on its weight and size. Three million yuan was far from enough to achieve the goal of freeing one thousand yaks; the trip on that day redeemed the freedom of 165 yaks. Fifteen trucks were rented to transport them to three monastic locations in Qinghai, all within the lineage-based network of the abbot. After the column of the trucks reached Tongren (Rebgong), the capital of Huangnan Prefecture, it split into three directions. I went with six trucks carrying eighty yaks headed to a semi-farming village in Guide County (Chekha).

When the trucks reached their destination, it was no surprise that the families who were to adopt them rather asked the abbot of the village monastery to reroute the yaks to a rangeland 160 km away near Qinghai Lake (*Tsongon Po*). This was because the nearest suitable grazing area for yaks was over twenty kilometers away from the village, high up in the mountains, and was already crammed with yaks and sheep from many families in the area. The hills surrounding the village have scarce vegetation after the deforestation of the 70s and 80s and following the complete disappearance of the glacier covering the highest mountain top in 2010. In between their subsistence farming, the villagers travel elsewhere to work for cash income. Many young members choose to live in cities after their college education. Neither the local environment nor the changing human demographics can revive the herding past. Thus, both the natural environment and human conditions did not favor the adoption of the yaks freed for life.

I have no doubt that spiritually, paying millions to slaughterhouses in order to free the yaks on death row is a noble act. At the same time, common sense suggests that this act is also simply a de facto financial transaction that fulfills Sino-Tibetan Buddhists' wish to rescue domesticated animals, but that rewards slaughterhouses with a lump sum cash revenue. The Buddhists certainly earn their spiritual merit from this transaction but it is not likely that they are putting an end to the meat industry with their buying power. On

the contrary, with the profit earned from the Buddhists and more profit to be made from the growing market demand for yak meat in urban China, the slaughterhouses will continue their business. In this case, the cycles of saving lives and killing lives are intertwined on the common ground of the universal value of money, which unites the two opposing human acts situated in China's market economy. This human condition truly attests to the Buddha's discernment of the endless cycle of birth and death, as well as his vow to save all suffering sentient beings until the hell realms are empty. In this regard, the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist initiative for freeing domesticated animals is limited within the human sphere.

Observably, freeing animals in this Tibetan context means restoring the freedom of domesticated animals, particularly yaks. This freedom specifically means the freedom from being slaughtered, not the freedom from human domestication. Therefore, when a yak is freed, it returns to its own herd or joins a new one. The animal bears a physical mark of freedom, usually a braid of colorful fabric tied around its horn, or a tag attached to one of its ears. If the yak is a female, its offspring are not eligible for the same freedom unless humans grant it to them. The yak's milk and its derivatives, such as butter and hard cheese, is divided into three portions to be shared between the calf, the human owner, and the monastery that sponsored its freedom. In turn, the owner provides the yak with grazing land, shelter, and protection from wolves, bears, or snow leopards. In other words, the freed yak resumes its routine with its herd members except that only a natural death awaits it, not the owner's butcher knife or that of a slaughterhouse. The freedom of the yak, thus, immediately benefits itself, its yak herd members, its human owner, and the monastery. The question remains whether the local ecology also benefits.

In my observation, there are two ecological challenges that the freed yaks plus human conditions present to the physical environments of their new homes. One is the pastoral land fenced as mandated by the government and allotted to each nomadic family. Another is that due to the high transportation costs, many of the freed yaks find new homes with semi-agricultural Tibetan families in lower altitude areas geographically closer to non-Tibetan towns and cities. Both circumstances involve human-induced environmental constraints and ecologically constricted habitats. The fenced pastoral grounds limit the traditional movement (through transhumance) of the yaks for grazing. Yak-raising regions are becoming ranches rather than rangelands, with a few exceptions in higher elevation areas such as Yushu. The vegetation in fenced pastoral lands suffer from overgrazing and lacks time to rejuvenate due to the increase in the yak population, in part because of the yak-freeing, but also because more yaks are raised to meet the increased demand in China.

With a lifespan of around twenty to thirty years and a breeding schedule of every other year, an increase in the yak population from the Buddhists' animal-freeing activities might be a blessing for the receiving family, who can now generate more milk and more cash, but the deterioration of grasslands on the Tibetan Plateau is a very real concern (Cao et al. 2019). It is possible that the human benefit derived from freeing yaks exceeds the environmental benefit.

## 5. The Controversy of Vegetarianism

Coupled with freeing domesticated animals, vegetarianism has been widely promoted by Khenpo Sodargye (2001, 2011b) and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro (2018) in Tibetan areas and urban China. Khenpo Sodargye (2011a) regards a "vegetarian diet as an antidote to the environmental crisis." Both Buddhist teachers tirelessly inform Tibetans and Han of the evidenced cruelty of killing livestock for human consumption (Tsultrim Lodro and Sodargye 2013) and recurrently emphasize the spiritual merit and health benefits of vegetarianism. While both vegetarians and meat-eating Buddhists participate in saving animal lives, not all meat-eating Buddhists are candidates for vegetarianism for both personal and ecologically conditioned dietary reasons. The divergent dietary preferences among Sino-Tibetan Buddhists are an ongoing source of disagreement between Tibetans and Han, widened beyond the interethnic Buddhist sphere.

To unite their Tibetan constituencies and Chinese followers with a commitment to vegetarianism as a way of preventing the killing of animals and of deepening the practitioners' commitment to compassionate living, the two Buddhist masters relentlessly take recourse to canonic texts to make an emphatic point about how being a vegetarian can save many animal and human lives, thereby saving the environment. The frequently referenced canonic texts are *The Lankavatara Sutra, The Nirvana Sutra* (*The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*), *The Great Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (*Mahaprajnaparamitopadesa*), and *The Abhidharmakośa* (Tsultrim Lodro 2020a, pp. 83, 85; Sodargye 2001, p. 193; 2009, pp. 18, 30). However, it is commonly known that canonic texts do not necessarily offer consistent advice about assuming a vegetarian diet; meat eating is not absolutely forbidden. In the Buddha's teachings on monastic precepts, he prohibits a monk from eating the meat of an animal whose slaughter he witnesses, or when he hears the sound of the animal being killed, or suspects that the animal is killed for him (*Mahisasavinaya* 2022, p. 471). In other words, the monk can eat the meat when he does not see or hear the killing and when he is sure that the killing is not intended for him. When the Buddha speaks to both monastic and lay audiences, meat eating is emphatically forbidden as it is alleged to ruin the seed of compassion (*Lankavatara Sutra* 2022, p. 119; *Nirvana Sutra* 2022, p. 59). The meat eating controversy remains to this day and is "as old as Buddhism itself" (Tworkov 2000, p. 341).

Khenpo Sodargye and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro apparently adhere to the sutras above that inform monks, nuns, and lay followers of the spiritual and material rewards of being a vegetarian and illustrate the horrific paths and future lifetimes waiting for meat eaters. The rewards are referred to through the images of good health, nobility, wealth, longevity, and celestial states of being, and as being conducive to nurturing bodhisattvas, arhats, pratyekabuddhas (those who achieve Buddhahood independently), and Buddhas—in other words, Buddhist saints and holy people. The fate of meat eaters is shown in the images of illnesses, house fires, earthquakes, lightning strikes, and death, or as the inevitability of being reincarnated as meat-eating animals, pigs, cows, sheep, insects, hungry ghosts, and hell beings (Tsultrim Lodro 2020a; Sodargye 2001, 2009). These juxtaposed images deliver a straightforward message; vegetarians are headed for enlightenment and meat eaters are destined for unfortunate events in this lifetime, and in future lifetimes they will be relegated to the realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hellish beings, without direct access to enlightenment.

Beyond the canonic texts, both Khenpo Sodargye and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro unanimously laud the long history and "fine custom" of the currently widespread practice of vegetarianism at Chinese Buddhist monasteries and among their lay followers (Tsultrim Lodro 2020b, p. 79; Sodargye 2009, p. 3). However, when their Han Chinese students spoke of their impression of Tibetan monks as meat eaters, Khenpo Sodargye responded with his observations of how meat is consumed in urban China, "Although Han Chinese areas are not like Tibetan nomadic areas, the animal killing situation is worse, as shown in the various ways of slaughtering animals; (the Chinese) not only kill cows, sheep, pigs, chicken and other animals, but also kill fish, shrimp, crabs, turtles, and other waterborne animals. Almost every city is like the capital of the demonic world spilled with the blood from killing" (2001, p. 9). At the same time, he spoke of killing animals in Tibet as rare events, "Because Tibet, the land of snow, is a place embodying Avalokiteshvara, representing the combined compassion of all buddhas, ninety-eight percent of Tibetans, born as Buddhists, rarely kill animals" (Sodargye 2009, p. 29). In addition, he and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro affirm the existence of vegetarianism since the official introduction of Buddhism to Tibet in the sixth century, reporting that "high lamas in Tibet have concertedly promoted and stressed the importance of stopping meat eating and adopting vegetarian diet" (Tsultrim Lodro 2020b, p. 193); therefore, "Tibet now has a sizable number of monks, nuns, and lay people who advocate and observe a vegetarian diet" (Sodargye 2009, p. 33).

Indisputably, scholarly research also corroborates their claims of Tibet's long history of vegetarianism among monks and nuns (Barstow 2018). However, the ethnicity-based exchange of impressions between these teachers and their Chinese students has little to do

with Tibet's ecology; instead, the topic feeds into wider identity politics. In the academic world, the defensive responses to the Chinese Buddhist observation of Tibetan monastics' meat consumption have been assessed as an action of "protecting the face of Tibetan people" while the cultural reality remains unchanged—"the fact that a majority of Tibetan religious elites eat meat" (Gaerrang 2016, pp. 5–6). Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism is inextricably caught in the dichotomy of being both a cultural identity marker and a world religion (Smyer Yü 2012). Vegetarianism, as an action of spiritual environmentalism, remains a non-environmental topic of debate between Buddhists and scholars.

The promotion of vegetarianism requires, but has hardly prompted, recognition among Sino-Tibetan Buddhists that its practice is ecologically incomparable between geographic regions. The Tibetan Plateau, with ninety-eight percent of its land unsuited for the cultivation of crops, proportionally supports pastoralism not agriculture. Due to its high altitude and short warm seasons, staple crops, such as highland barley and wheat in farming and semi-farming areas, are limited to one yield a year. As the plateau has been fully integrated into China's modernizing economy in the last three decades, vegetables are more accessible, largely supplied from farms operated by Han Chinese migrant farmers (Yeh 2013, p. 7) outside the local area, as well as from local farmers. The common vegetables are radish, cabbage, and mustard green. These vegetables offer no protein. Neither is the plateau known for containing native plants as protein sources. Meat is the primary protein source for Tibetans, including monks, nuns, and lay Buddhist practitioners, except those who take the vow not to eat meat. In my fieldwork in the Tibetan areas of Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai, and Yunnan, monastic vegetarians are the exception rather than the norm. While vegetables are becoming an integral part of the Tibetan diet in the twenty-first century, vegetable-based protein is rarely consumed as a replacement for animal protein among Tibetan Buddhists.

In contrast, the civilizations of India and China arose from lands far more compatible with sedentary agricultural practices. Given their warmer climates and low elevations, both the Indian and Chinese agricultural worlds have diverse crops and domesticated animal species, with both regions having offered a variety of protein sources to humans long before Prince Gautama was born and Buddhist ethics were developed. The sources of plant protein are plentiful in both world regions. Vegetarians have no trouble finding plant-based protein to meet their daily needs. For instance, lentils have sustained countless generations of vegetarians in India, while soybeans have done the same in China. It is not surprising that many Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains in ancient India became vegetarians. Neither is it surprising that Emperor Wudi (464-549CE) of the Southern Liang Dynasty in China issued an imperial decree to promote a vegetarian diet not only among monks and nuns but also among lay people (Kieschnick 2005, p. 198). His vegetarian legacy remains popular in contemporary Chinese monasteries and the homes of lay people, and is expressed in a variety of vegetarian menus supported by plant-based protein sources. This lasting legacy is well noticed by Khenpo Sodargye and Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro in their interactions with Han Chinese Buddhists.

Concurrently, the vegetarian diet has remained marginal to this day in monasteries and among the lay population in Tibetan regions, given the geological and ecological conditions being unsuited for extensively diversified agriculture. As mentioned above, although vegetables are accessible in contemporary Tibet, vegetable-based protein has not yet become popular. The ecological conditions not only limit the foodway of a culture, but also shape its customs and civilizational basis over time. There are both ecological and cultural reasons why yaks remain an important symbol of Tibet and Tibetan culture.

Both Tibetans and Han are ecological beings environed in their respective ecosystems. Buddhists are not exceptions. They may work toward a future in which humans no longer eat animal meat, animals no longer kill humans, and animals no longer hunt each other—a vegetarian world similarly envisioned by ancient Jews and Christians—"The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (*NASB* 1990). However, this remote, purely vegetarian future that has been proposed since ancient times contin-

ues to remain infeasible for the majority of living beings who are conditioned by their ecological worlds and evolutionarily determined nutritional needs. It is worth considering the negative ecological and civilizational implications of recommending that Tibetans become vegetarian en masse, particularly on land more ecologically suited to herd grazing or browsing, as well as the cultural expression related to this land-based livelihood-making, but not to crop agriculture. Additionally, these formerly pastoral people would become dependent upon food imports from places where the land would be under increased production pressure, likely resulting in more widespread monocropping of soybeans or other vegetable protein sources. Civilizationally, widespread vegetarianism can foreseeably erode pastoralism, which is the subsistent and cultural foundation of Tibetan culture.

At the same time, human-centered debates on vegetarianism further dim the ecological intent of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist environmentalism of "saving the environment." Overall, freeing animals coupled with vegetarianism certainly saves the lives of individual animals, but has not yet shown how it saves the ecologically conceived environments of the Earth, which are under multiple anthropogenic assaults. The ecosystemic thinking and actions are sadly absent in the spiritual environmentalist logic of saving domesticated animals to save the environment in the Anthropocene.

## 6. Toward An Earth Sutra in Support of Eco-Buddhism

Widely inspired by the global environmental thought-trends in Earth-centered thinking (Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel 2016; Hanh 2021; HHDL and Alt 2020), it is possible that a new ecologically substantiated addition to the Buddha Dharma will emerge from the rapidly evolving eco-Buddhism that originated from North America and is being diversified in other parts of the world. This new addition to the Dharma could serve as a compass for Buddhist environmental engagements and a further explication of Buddhism-derived ecology, comparable to the integral ecology proposed by Pope Francis (2015) in his *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, a landmark text of Christian Earth stewardship in the twenty-first century that goes beyond the Christian canon to embrace the Earth as a mother figure and to call for the conservation of indigenous ecological knowledge. While the Christian canon is fixed without room for additions, the Buddhist canon, in comparison, stays open to future teachings and treatises that profoundly advance Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings beyond ancient India. A historical example is *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* 《六祖壇經》 (Taisho, 48/2007:237a-345b), featuring the teachings of the Chinese Dharma Master Huineng (638-713CE). New additions to the Buddhist canon are, thus, practically possible. This means that Buddhist environmentalists can possibly take more ecologically innovative actions than their Christian counterparts.

The UNEP Faith for Earth initiative is an indicator of the healthy competition between faith-based environmental initiatives that have a common goal of sustaining the Earth's environments and life communities. The field of religion and ecology also shows the salvific power of the Earth as a planetary life and a sacred divine creation (Grim and Tucker 2014). Invocations of the Earth as Goddess Gaia (Margulis 1998; Lovelock 1995), Mother (Hanh 2021) or as the maternal principle (Berry 2009) are widespread among religious leaders, scientists, scholars, and environmental practitioners. The climatic, geological, and ecological expressions of the Earth, in both slow and quick acts of violence, are environmentally transforming human belief systems and associative behaviors in the Anthropocene, a human-spurred geological epoch (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000).

Within this context, a supplement to the Buddha Dharma is actually emerging—from outside the existing Buddhist canon—through Buddhists' embrace and application of modern scientific discoveries fueling their growing appreciation of the Earth as the mother of all (Hanh 2013) or as the planetary maternal principle (Berry 2009; Pope Francis 2015). Eco-Buddhists feel compelled to think systemically about the planetary life of the Earth and its innate environmental freedom—the unimpeded creative forces of nature on the scale of Deep Time—uniting and nourishing biotic and abiotic worlds (Smyer Yü 2021, p. 254). While Earth's planetary biography affords ethics-minded environmentalists' recognition

of the moral considerability of the Earth as a living entity, the planet's innate environmental freedom is an embodiment of the stories of the Earth before and after the emergence of humankind. Powered by fossil fuels, modern humans attempt to dominate the Earth, and in turn the Earth reciprocates with global warming and a variety of human-induced environmental disasters.

Seen through the template of this Deep Time thinking, the historical, geographical, geological, and ecological limitations of what the Buddha taught during his lifetime in ancient northern India are made apparent. The Deep Time perspective can, thus, lend momentum to Buddhist environmentalists wishing to recalibrate the canonic notions of Dukkha (suffering) and dependent co-origination from their current focus on the karmic footprints of individual sentient beings to the geophysiological history of the Earth and to the systemic karma of human institutions and societies. Systemic suffering is a trademark of our time—the Anthropocene—in which the suffering of the Earth's environment is human-induced but also entails the suffering of human and non-human beings. Human–Earth relations are crudely caught in terms of modern humans' systemic exploitation of the Earth. Thus, Buddhist environmentalists' perpetuation of canonically based, human-centered approaches to addressing environmental suffering, as shown in the case of the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist environmentalism, neglects this more expansive understanding. Systemic suffering requires systemic examination and solutions.

Reflecting on the efforts of Buddhist environmentalists in Asia and North America, I see the emergence of a new, ecologically grounded vehicle of Buddhism built upon an expanded notion of Dukkha and encompassing systemically precipitated suffering. This will require an open, candid rewriting of the teleology of dependent co-origination to celebrate the bittersweetness of life on Earth rather than one that dwells obsessively on the human-centered discourse of ignorance and suffering as the primary conditions of earthly living—as if each sentient being starts this lifetime as an exercise in receiving the karmic retribution for their alleged ignorance from past lifetimes. This ancient Hindu–Buddhist doctrine defeats the purpose of enlightenment, indiscriminately suppresses the innate hope of newborns for a happy and free life to come, and condones oppressive social systems, justifying their marginalization of the poor, the wretched, and those who are culturally and racially different.

A fine example of the expanded meaning of Dukkha found in recent Buddhist history is Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's *navayana*—a "new vehicle" of the Buddha Dharma joining the Mahayana and Vajrayana "fleet"—specifically crafted for the Dalits of modern India. Ambedkar realized that the existing Buddhist canon was unable to address the systemic injustice and inequality inflicted on the Dalits by the Hindu caste system (Ambedkar 1974; Chakraborty 2021); in response, he radically expanded the canonic basis of Dukkha from its focus on the karma of individual persons to the systemic karma of human societies as a way of understanding the injustice, inequality, and inhumanity Dalits experienced, rather than blaming the individual for, and thereby excusing, systemic suffering.

Similarly, contemporary Buddhists are witnessing systemic environmental crises across the world, even as the existing Buddhist canon offers little ecosystemic support to their ecological claims and environmental endeavors. They are compelled to do as Ambedkar did in India but with their intended ecological orientation. In the case of the Sino-Tibetan environmentalists, the human privilege and ecological disconnection currently resulting from the freeing of yaks and abstinence from meat eating oblige the participating Buddhists to think in ecological terms about whether or not canonically sanctioned vegetarianism and the agricultural practices that entails, as well as the increasing yak population, can alleviate the suffering of ecological systems on the Tibetan Plateau and the adjacent regions. The signs are obviously negative, as the immediate beneficiaries are humans and yaks and not the greater ecosystem. The two leading Tibetan lamas can very well take a few radical steps to expand the sphere of Dukkha from the human realm to non-human lifeworlds and to the Earth itself. The canonic privileging of the value of individual human and non-human lives is divorced from those living beings' greater ecological lifeworlds.

This produces outcomes mainly favoring human spiritual merit, human material wellbeing, and the domestic freedom of human-owned or human-raised animals.

To think ecologically, the contemporary Buddhist logic of saving animals' lives to save the environment can perhaps be reversed as *saving the environment to save lives*. This proposition may require Buddhist teachers to shift the canonic gravity from the value of individual lives to the value of the ecological earth as the ultimate life-giver and life-receiver. A new form of ecology-centered Buddhism might very well emerge from the current worldwide Buddhist environmental alliance if the canonic notion of Dukkha is revised to encompass multispecies worlds of the regions where Buddhism has a presence and the Earth in general, both of which are currently being endangered or encroached upon by a variety of the anthropogenic forces.

By highlighting both the Deep Time perspective and the more-than-human suffering that exists due to humans' systemic domination of the Earth, I mean to convey an idea to Buddhist environmentalists and environmental scholars. What is missing in the existing Buddhist canon is what could be called an "Earth Sutra" that would serve as a testament to the "Third Turning of the Wheel (of Dharma)" (Macy 1989) toward the environmental awareness and concomitant support of the sustainable flourishing of the Earth and its multispecies residents. This currently hypothetical sutra would tell the stories of the Earth's past, present, and future and explicate a few canon-expanding and radical (in Macy's sense) approaches to furthering Buddhist understandings of species interdependence, and could potentially include the "right relationship between humans and the natural world" in the Buddha's Middle Way.

First, consider a sacred Buddhist text in which the Earth's origin and deep past is told not only from the perspective of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist mythologies and historical geographies, but that is puzzled together with the additions from diverse creation stories from across human societies and scientific discoveries. This requires Buddhists to reach out to and collaborate with non-Buddhists to recreate a collective human memory of the Earth's past. The essence of recounting the Earth's deep past is to show the history of the Earth's innate freedom as an unimaginably ancient planetary living being before the arrival of humankind. This innate freedom has expressed itself in geological, ecological, and climatic terms that have enabled tectonic movements, formed continents, shapeshifted water bodies, implemented regionally differentiated seasons, and created ecotones to interconnect diverse ecosystems. The innate environmental freedom of the Earth continues to express itself, except in spite of frustrations and disruptions catalyzed by modern humans. This radical approach to welcoming new contents into the Buddhist canon is based on the growing trend of Buddhists' recognition of the sentience and maternal essence of the Earth (Hanh 2013; Hunt-Badiner 1990), as well as interfaith endeavors to fashion a new planetary ethical compass in the Anthropocene based on the observed expressions and patterns of the Earth's innate environmental freedom and their spiritual implications.

Second, the proposed Earth Sutra would start with the Earth as a planetary living being, a sentient being, whose physical forms compose an integral part of that sentience. Thus, the ecological and biological agencies of the physical world and their generative outcomes will be systematically acknowledged, examined, and explicated. This newly recognized sentience of spiritual–material embodiment would not be pitted against Buddha Nature as though they are a pair of opposites, or suggestive of a This-Worldly unenlightened state of being and an Other-Worldly Pure Land. Instead, by recognizing the mutual embodiment of the Earth and its living beings, the new sutra would consider the Earth's innate environmental freedom as an integral part of Buddha Nature, with the conception of the latter inspired by the former. Thus, the state of enlightenment would be recognized as available to all embodied existences of the spiritual and the material worlds and not just to humans.

Third, this said, the Earth Sutra is expected to offer a radical revision of the Buddhist cosmology of the sentient worlds that are currently parsed into the aforementioned six realms of rebirth. The suggested radicalness refers to a shift from the human-privileged

moral and spiritual hierarchy of sentient realms to the ecological groundedness of sentient existence. When the human realm is regarded as the only gateway to the Other Shore or to liberation from suffering, Buddhist ecology is only nominally ecological, offering an ecology without ecological thinking. In essence, it is only a doctrinal instrument reinforcing the long-lasting paradox of the assumed equality of all sentient beings based on the doctrine of Buddha Nature and the exceptionality of humankind as the only species with direct access to enlightenment. To be a true ecology in the relational sense of life communities, Buddhist ecology is compelled to see the diverse lifeworlds of the Earth from the perspective of natural science-based ecology as well. It is obligated to participate in the worldwide discourse of how humans have constructed the concept of nature (Castree 2014), how we have produced anthropogenic forces of change (Chakrabarty 2021; Smyer Yü and Wouters 2023), and how we have contributed to modern humans' amnesia of our ancient, pre-Buddhist ancestral knowledge of the mutual embodiment of humans and non-humans without harsh moral judgments on animals and former humans currently reincarnated in animal bodies (Harvey 2013; Descola 2014; Smyer Yü 2020). In other words, the studies of the mutual embodiment of animality and humanity, and of life and the Earth, shall be ecologically deepened in Buddhist ecology.

Lastly, as the Earth is presently undergoing a multitude of systemic ills due to humans' extractive activities, the restoration of the Earth's health necessitates the basis of sustainable futures for all. In essence, the environmental crisis is synonymous with the crisis of the Earth. The karmic analysis found in the Buddhist canon, which relates individual lives' suffering, is no longer able to shed new light on the causal factors of the systemic suffering collectively experienced by the physical environments of the Earth and by human, animal, and plant communities. Human suffering is intrinsically part of the collective suffering experienced by ecosystems, physical environments, and non-human beings. Immediately relevant to the logic of saving the environment to save lives proposed earlier, human actions to alleviate human and animal suffering will start from freeing the lands and waters that are overexploited by humans, as well as by the domesticated plant and animal agents who serve human material interests. The ecological privilege of land, watershed, and oceanic systems over humans and their domesticated animals in the proposed sutra would foreseeably require Buddhist environmentalists to practice political ecology to address the uneven degradation of such systems around the world, to trace the origins of systemic suffering, and to have a clearer picture of who is accountable for the national, regional, and global distribution of such suffering.

The proposed Earth Sutra could be potentially one of the first outcomes from the Third Turning of the Wheel by Buddhist environmentalists. Its radical expansion of the existing Buddhist canon would allow Buddhists to explore new ways of addressing new forms of systemic suffering due to environmental violence and the destruction brought about by the anthropogenic forces of change, as well as to find new sets of concepts, vocabularies, and methods to advance solution-oriented environmental discourses and modes of activism.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji. 1974. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Bombay: Siddharth.

*Avatamsaka Sutra* 《大方廣佛華嚴經》. 2022. Taipei City: CBETA (中華電子佛典協會).

Barstow, Geoffrey. 2018. *Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism, and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bauman, Whitney. 2014. *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Berkes, Fikret. 2012. *Sacred Ecology*. London: Routledge.

Berry, Thomas. 2009. *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cao, Jianjun, Jan F. Adamowski, Ravinesh C. Deo, Xueyun Xu, Yifan Gong, and Qi Feng. 2019. Grassland Degradation on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau: Reevaluation of Causative Factors. *Rangeland Ecology & Management* 72: 988–95.

Castree, Noel. 2014. *Making Sense of Nature: Representation, Politics and Democracy*. New York: Routledge.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2021. *The Climate of History in A Planetary Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chakraborty, Biswadeep. 2021. Epistemological Bases of Navayana: Ambedkar's Vision of Nation, Identity and Justice. *Navajyoti, International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research* 5: 2456–3781.

Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. 2000. The "Anthropocene". *Global Change Newsletter* 41: 17–18.

Descola, Philippe. 2014. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Dhammika, Shravasti. 2015. *Nature and The Environment in Early Buddhism*. Singapore: Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society.

Pope Francis. 2015. *Encyclical Letter Laudato si' of the Holy Father Francis*, 1st ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice vaticana.

Francis, Henry Thomas, and Edward Joseph Thomas, eds. 1916. *Jataka Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gaerrang, Kabzung. 2016. Tibetan Identity and Tibetan Buddhism in Trans-Regional Connection: The Contemporary Vegetarian Movement in Pastoral Areas of Tibet (China). *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines*. Available online: http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/2755 (accessed on 2 December 2022).

Gao, Pan-pan, Yi Luo, Qi-xing Zhou, and Da-qing Mao. 2009. Research Advancement of Antibiotics Resistance Genes (ARGs) in Aquaculture Environment. *Asian Journal of Ecotoxicology* 4: 770–79.

Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. 2004. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. London: Routledge.

Grim, John, and Mary Evelyn Tucker. 2014. *Ecology and Religion*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Hanh, Thich Nhat. 2013. *Love Letter to the Earth*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.

Hanh, Thich Nhat. 2021. *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*. New York: HarperCollins.

Harris, Ian. 1991. How environmentalist is Buddhism? *Religion* 21: 101–14. [CrossRef]

Harvey, Graham, ed. 2013. *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. London: Routledge.

HHDL, and Franz Alt. 2020. *Our Only Home: A Climate Appeal to the World*. Toronto: Hanover Square Press.

Hunt-Badiner, Allan, ed. 1990. Introduction. In *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, pp. xiii–xviii.

Ives, Christopher. 2017. A mixed Dharmic bag: Debates about Buddhism and ecology. In *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. Edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. London: Routledge, pp. 43–51.

Kaza, Stephanie. 2000. To Save All Beings: Buddhist Environmental Activism. In *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Edited by Christopher S. Queen. Boston: Wisdom Publications, pp. 159–83.

Kaza, Stephanie, and Kenneth Kraft, eds. 2000. *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.

Keown, Damien. 2007. Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach. *Contemporary Buddhism* 8: 97–112. [CrossRef]

Kieschnick, John. 2005. Buddhist Vegetarianism in China. In *Of Tripod and Palate*. Edited by Roel Sterckx. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 186–212.

*Lankavatara Sutra* 《入楞伽經》. 2022. Taipei City: CBETA (中華電子佛典協會).

Lockwood, Deirdre. 2017. Antibiotic Resistance Could Spread Through Feed at Fish Farms. *Chemical and Engineering News*. September 29. Available online: https://cen.acs.org/articles/95/web/2017/09/Antibiotic-resistance-spread-through-feed.html (accessed on 2 December 2022).

*Lotus Sutra* 《妙法蓮華經》. 2002. Taipei City: CBETA (中華電子佛典協會).

Lovelock, James. 1995. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Macy, Joanna. 1979. Dependent Co-arising: The Distinctiveness of Buddhist Ethics. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7: 38–52.

Macy, Joanna. 1989. The Third Turning of the wheel. *Inquiring Mind* 5: 10–12.

Macy, Joanna. 1990. The Greening of the Self. In *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. Edited by Allan Hunt-Badiner. Berkeley: Parallax Press, pp. 53–63.

Macy, Joanna. 1992. Deep Ecology or Shallow Environmentalism. *Human Potential*, Spring. 10–13, 29–32.

Macy, Joanna. 1995. Working Through Environmental Despair. In *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth Healing the Mind*. Edited by Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, pp. 240–62.

*Mahisasavinaya* 《彌沙塞部和醯五分律》. 2022. Taipei City: CBETA (中華電子佛典協會).

Margulis, Lynn. 1998. *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*. Amherst: Basic Books.

*New American Standard Bible (NASB)*, Isaiah 65:25. 1990. La Habra: The Lockman Foundation.

*Nirvana Sutra* 《大般涅槃經》. 2022. Taipei City: CBETA (中華電子佛典協會).

Odum, Eugene P. 1959. *Fundamentals of Ecology*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company.

Ostrom, Elinor. 1990. *Governing the Commons: Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rose, Deborah Bird, Thom van Dooren, Matthew Chrulew, Stuart Cooke, Matthew Kearnes, and Emily O'Gormand. 2012. Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities. *Environmental Humanities* 1: 1–5. [CrossRef]

Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2020. *The Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schmithausen, Lambert. 1997. The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics [Electronic]* 4: 1–74. Available online: http://jbe.gold.ac.uk (accessed on 2 December 2022).

Sheng-yen. 2001. Speech for the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. In *A Commitment to World Peace by World Religious Leaders: A Record of the Ven. Sheng-yen's Attendance at the UN Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders*. Edited by Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Foundation. Taipei: Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Foundation.

Smyer Yü, Dan. 2012. *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China*. London: Routledge.
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2013. Field documentation of the environmental dialogue between Khenpo Sodargye and Emily Yeh in Boulder. *Colorado*, April 1.
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2014. Sentience of the Earth: Eco-Buddhist Mandalizing of Dwelling Place in Amdo. *The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 8: 483–501.
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2015. *Mindscaping the Landscape of Tibet: Place, Memorability, Eco-Aesthetics*. Religion and Society Series. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Press.
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2018. Biosocial Body of Ethno-religious Boundaries in a Tibetan Marriage. In *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands*. Edited by Alexander Horstmann, Martin Saxer and Alessandro Rippa. London: Routledge.
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2020. The Critical Zone as a Planetary Animist Sphere: Etho-graphing an Affective Consciousness of the Earth. *JSRNC* 14: 271–90. [CrossRef]
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2021. Symbiotic indigeneity and commoning in the anthropogenic Himalayas. In *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas: Symbiotic Indigeneity, Commoning, Sustainability*. Edited by Dan Smyer Yü and Erik de Maaker. London: Routledge, pp. 239–61.
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2022. The Middle Highlands of Modern China as a Historical Inter-Asian Zomia: Human-Nature Diversity in the Hengduan Mountains. In *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Highland Asia*. Edited by Jelle J. P. Wouters and Michael Heneise. London: Routledge.
Smyer Yü, Dan. 2023. Multipolar Clime Studies of the Anthropocenic Himalaya, Andes and Arctic: An Introduction. In *Storying Multipolar Climes of the Himalaya, Andes and Arctic: Anthropocenic Climate and Shapeshifting Watery Lifeworlds*. Edited by Dan Smyer Yü and Jelle Wouters. London: Routledge, pp. 1–25.
Smyer Yü, Dan, and Jelle Wouters, eds. 2023. *Storying Multipolar Climes of the Himalaya, Andes and Arctic: Anthropocenic Climate and Shapeshifting Watery Lifeworlds*. London: Routledge.
Sodargye (Khenpo). 2001. *The Rays of Wisdom* (慧光云聚). Hong Kong: The Publishing House of China Culture.
Sodargye (Khenpo). 2009. *Transcending Life and Death* (生死救度). Hong Kong: Sunyata Press.
Sodargye (Khenpo). 2011a. Vegetarian Diet is the Antidote (素食是环境与生命问题的解药). *China News Digest International*. October 14 索达吉堪布：素食是环境与生命问题一剂解药. Available online: hx.cnd.org/2011/10/14/ (accessed on 2 December 2022).
Sodargye (Khenpo). 2011b. *Buddhist Lessons for Children* (儿童佛教课). Hong Kong: The Publishing House of China Culture.
Sodargye (Khenpo). 2012. Spiritual Greening and Happy Life, Speech at Suzhou University of Science and Technology (心灵绿化与幸福人生—— 演讲—— 苏州科技学院). Available online: https://mingguang.im/player/15%20%E5%94%A4%E9%86%92%E6%B7%B1%E8%97%8F%E7%9A%84%E5%96%84/%E5%BF%83%E7%81%B5%E7%BB%BF%E5%8C%96%E4%B8%8E%E5%B9%B8%E7%A6%8F%E4%BA%BA%E7%94%9F-%E6%BC%94%E8%AE%B2-%E8%8B%8F%E5%B7%9E%E7%A7%91%E6%8A%80%E5%AD%A6%E9%99%A2 (accessed on 2 December 2022).
Sodargye (Khenpo). 2014. Q & A about Freeing Animals (放生疑问问答录). Available online: http://www.xuefo.net/nr/article22/221562.html (accessed on 2 December 2022).
Sodargye (Khenpo), and Dan Smyer Yü. 2017. Revisioning Buddhism as a Science of the Mind in a Secularized China: A Tibetan perspective. *Buddhists and the Making of Modern Chinese Societies* 18: 91–111. Available online: https://www.globalbuddhism.org/article/view/1232 (accessed on 2 December 2022).
Sponsel, Leslie, and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel. 2016. Buddhism and Ecology. In *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. Edited by David Adams Leeming. Berlin: Springer, pp. 1–6.
Swearer, Donald K. 2001. Principles and Poetry, Places and Stories: The Resources of Buddhist Ecology. *Daedalus* 130: 225–41.
Tsultrim Lodro (Khenpo). 2018. *Precious Life* (生命的吉光片羽). Haikou: Hainan Publishing House.
Tsultrim Lodro (Khenpo). 2020a. *Wisdom Lamp Meditation Textbook Volume I* (慧灯禅修教材一). Vancouver: Huideng Group.
Tsultrim Lodro (Khenpo). 2020b. *Wisdom Lamp Meditation Textbook Volume II* (慧灯禅修教材二). Vancouver: Huideng Group.
Tsultrim Lodro (Khenpo), and Sodargye (Khenpo). 2013. *The Truth of Life* (生命的真相). Beijing: World Publishing Corporation.
Tworkov, Helen. 2000. Buddha and the Beasts. In *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*. Edited by Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). 2020. From Islam to Buddhism, Faiths Have Long Encouraged Stewardship of Nature. Available online: https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/islam-buddhism-faiths-have-long-encouraged-stewardship-nature (accessed on 2 December 2022).
Yeh, Emily. 2013. *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.